

The arts on the ballot

The state's cultural spending is way down, and the views of the candidates are all over the map.

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Californians planning to vote in the recall election Tuesday can consider the following if they care about state funding for the arts.

Regardless of California's budget emergency, Lt. Gov. Cruz Bustamante and Peter Camejo think it's shortsighted for the state to rank last in the nation in funding for the arts. Both say they would restore spending at least to where it stood a year ago, before it was nearly erased.

Arnold Schwarzenegger, responding by e-mail to written questions, declined to say how much he would spend on the arts before being able to "assess the magnitude of the deficit in order to see what level of public funding could be provided."

Gov. Gray Davis has presided over a record high and the current low for state arts funding; he wants it to rebound, said spokesman Gabriel Sanchez, but can make no promises until revenue projections for next year become clearer. "I don't want to get people's hopes up, but if we can do it, we will," Sanchez said.

State Sen. Tom McClintock (R-Thousand Oaks) is philosophically opposed to government funding of the arts and would seek to eliminate the California Arts Council, the state agency that parcels out arts grants.

Three years ago, when dot-coms flourished and the treasury was fat, state arts spending in California peaked at \$30.7 million. Now it stands at \$1 million, or about 3 cents for every state resident. Grants from the National Endowment for the Arts and fees from special arts-booster license plates bring the total budget to \$2.9 million for the California Arts Council. But even in flush years, arts spending has

been a relatively minuscule item for state government. The overall state budget is now \$99 billion.

"We're starting to feel like the Detroit Tigers," said Adam Gottlieb, arts council spokesman.

Arts spending has both peaked and plummeted under Davis. His final budget proposal for 2003-04 called for \$5 million in state arts grants, which would not have been a record low. But that got slashed during the summer's protracted budget standoff between the governor and Republican state legislators.

Bustamante would end the losing streak by allocating \$18 million for the arts in his first budget as governor, said his campaign manager, Lynn Montgomery. That would restore arts spending to where it stood a year ago. Then, as the economy allowed, Bustamante would aim higher.

Camejo, the Green Party candidate, said his immediate goal would be to match the \$30-million peak of three years ago; he would appoint a new commission on arts spending to propose "an appropriate number" beyond that. Bustamante and Camejo have proposed higher taxes on wealthy earners to help relieve California's multibillion-dollar budget shortfall.

Schwarzenegger, who is against increasing taxes, says he would look to better marketing of the arts license-plate program, which at \$30 or \$70 for each new plate has brought in about \$900,000 per year.

It would take almost a year to pump additional money into the arts via the regular budget process. A long-shot attempt is afoot in the state Assembly to begin the rescue sooner: A majority of the chamber's members want to give the arts an immediate boost from \$1 million to \$7.5 million. Assembly members Mark Leno (D-San Francisco) and Christine Kehoe (D-San Diego) plan to introduce a bill restoring that amount when the legislature reconvenes in January; they have secured petition signatures from 40 fellow members, all Democrats, who support the idea.

"In the scheme of things, we're not talking about a lot of money, but the impact is great," Leno said. Not wanting to siphon money away from other state services to replenish the arts, Leno said he will propose a small fee on some form of arts-related consumption. He hasn't firmed up any details, but he said a nickel tax for video rentals would be one kind of consumption fee to aid the arts.

Creating a fee that would kick in this year would take a two-thirds majority of both the 80-member Assembly and the state Senate — which would mean gaining support from Republicans in both houses at a time when GOP members have vowed not to allow higher taxes or fees.

"It's uphill, but more than a worthy battle," Leno said.

Meanwhile, cuts are starting to hit home at the California Arts Council. All regular arts grants have been suspended, said Gottlieb, the agency spokesman. A dozen staffers will lose their jobs between now and January, and six vacant positions will remain unfilled.

That leaves 19 employees who will try to sustain operations in "a skeletal form" so that the agency can return quickly to its work of evaluating and ranking hundreds of grant proposals and awarding slices of the state arts pie when money again becomes available. The agency's overhead will be about \$2 million

this year, Gottlieb said; brainstorming has begun on how to disburse the remaining \$1 million in its budget. Instead of giving money to individual theater companies, orchestras, museums, dance troupes and other cultural presenters, the plan is to funnel money to umbrella organizations that look out for the interests of an entire discipline or geographic region within the state.

"We haven't figured it out yet," Gottlieb said. "This is all very new."

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